

Hubert Damisch

Noah's Ark. Essays on Architecture

Cambridge/London: MIT Press, 2016, 372 pages, ISBN: 9780262528580

Christophe Van Gerrewey

In 1987, a themed issue was published of the French journal *Critique*, founded in 1946 by Georges Bataille. It was devoted to 'L'objet architecture' and it included texts by, among others, Manfredo Tafuri, Jean-Louis Cohen, Joseph Rykwert, Kenneth Frampton, Aldo Rossi, Massimo Cacciari and Anthony Vidler. The opening article, entitled 'L'arche de Noé', was written by Hubert Damisch (1928). An updated version of this text is the prologue to the French philosopher's new collection of essays on architecture, to which it has likewise lent its title.

Noah's Ark, with an introduction by Anthony Vidler, is appearing in the *Writing Architecture series* edited by Cynthia Davidson. It follows 2001's collection *Skyline: the narcissistic city*, a translation of the French book from 1996. The recent book has no French original, and this is meaningful: if there exists a common field of architectural discourse in the West, English is its language. In 1987, French cultural and philosophical thought experienced its heyday, and (late) structuralism and semiotics continued to dominate theory, also in the field of architecture. Equally important was the seemingly unfragmented – and often uncritical or at least unproblematic – nature of architectural thought, and the ways in which it expressed itself by means of nearly metaphysical categories. Who would today, almost 30 years after 1987, dare to devote an issue of a journal – or one single essay – to a general theme such as 'the object of architecture'? Or who, as Damisch did in the text 'Noah's Ark', would still have the courage to take seriously the enlightened but surprisingly concise definition of architecture, as it was present in the *Encyclopédie*, and subsequently compare it with the lemma on the ark of Noah, undertaking an excursion on the human capacity to imagine meaningful structures to survive – collectively – the end of the world?

This double legacy or tradition – the ambitious, polyvalent and seemingly neutral philosophy of structuralism and the related but in the end impossible desire to deal with architecture as a clearly defined, comprehensible and valuable human activity – haunts Damisch' writings in *Noah's Ark* and gives them their force, together with the paradoxical ability of the author to develop general thoughts on architecture by considering those transitional moments when the art of building reaches a crisis or a limit, and – almost but not quite – turns into something else. It is probably impossible to develop an oeuvre of architectural writings without taking

into account, in the background, a sister discipline or another domain of human knowledge or interpretation – literature, for example, or music or politics. For Damisch, this next of kin to architecture is painting, an art form that is the subject of the majority of his writings. Also in 1987, he published *L'origine de la perspective*, that was translated into English in 1992, and to which he refers briefly in this book. Always a lover of displacements and reversals, Damisch does not study art history in order to understand the present, but works the other way around: he looks at the beginning of perspectival drawing from the vantage point of its disappearance in modern painting. The same can be said about the way he deals with the relationship between architecture and painting. On the one hand, architecture is inconceivable without perspective, as a way to imagine and to represent three-dimensional space; on the other hand, architecture has nothing to do with perspective, because it is not a representation of space but the real spatial deal itself. For Damisch, what is crucial (as he states in the aptly titled ‘Architecture is...’, a collection of lecture fragments spoken at the *ANY*-conferences, organised by Davidson at the end of the 20th century) is ‘the passage, or shift, from the two-dimensional space in which the painter operated, in terms of *composition*, to the three-dimensional space the architect dealt with and in which *construction* was to take place.’ A painter composes, an architect constructs. In the composition and the construction of this division, Alberti – author of both *De re aedificatoria* and *De pictura* – acts as the major historical example for Damisch. For Alberti, he writes, ‘architecture first had to settle within the two dimensions of the plane and to “compose” with painting in order to develop its own distinctive mode of representation – one that excluded any illusion of depth or distortion of volume that could alter the sense of proportion.’ Of course, in the contemporary absence of classical painterly perspective, ‘painting has ceased to be the trailblazing medium it was in the first decades of the twentieth century’, Damisch admits honestly, paving the way for a contemporary advantage and admiration of architecture.

It is therefore instructive to compare his theory with that of his fellow Frenchman Jacques Lucan, twenty years younger, and author of, among others, *Composition, Non-Composition: Architecture and Theory in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* from 2012 – his magnum opus, and an history of the plan as the penultimate tool of the architect. On the one hand, their convictions are unredeemable: composing and drawing on paper, Damisch seems to say, is what artists and painters do; the visual rendering of a space and of three-dimensional reality by means of perspective (or a plan), no matter how valuable and necessary, cannot be compared to the material, physical, manual labour of building and constructing. On the other hand, the division between composition and construction (and thus between Lucan and

Damisch), is false: every plan is a precise dream of a construction, while it is impossible to construct without (at least an imagined) plan, no matter how simple or conceptual. Material construction and abstract composition (of a plan) strive, at other moments in the building process, for the same thing: to create an unrepeatable and real space, that is not only experienced visually but also corporeally. As such, both architectural composition and construction deny or at least ‘extrude’ painterly or pictorial representation. In his essay on French metal worker, self-taught architect and designer Jean Prouvé, originally published in 1990 in an exhibition catalogue of the Centre Pompidou, Damisch writes, in words that are exemplary for his ideas: ‘One of the merits of the “structural iconography” developed by Prouvé is that, in its principle, it constitutes the best antidote to the partly promotional fascination with the image, which is one of the scourges of contemporary architecture.’ This does not simply mean that architecture needs to be built in order to be truly architectural and effective – it also means that the main concern of the architect should lie in the full implementation and in the detailed and reasoned realization of architecture. ‘Prouvé’s concept’, Damisch writes in the same essay, ‘responds to a fundamental principle: when it comes to *constructing*, it is not enough to draw and then consign the project to a design office to make the necessary adjustments for the building’s stability and proper functioning. *You do not calculate folded sheet metal, you experience it.*’

The latter emphasis is the author’s, and it may seem puzzling, certainly in our era of parametric design, plummeting building speed, architectural spectacles that far exceed the human scale (imagine Gehry or Zaidi ‘experiencing’ the metal folding necessary for their architectural achievements), and (therefore) a banishment of truly experimental, speculative or idealistic architecture to the domain of the imagination on paper. Also when writing about Mies (and the rebuilding of the Barcelona Pavilion), Damisch regrets how ‘construction has ceased to be both the matrix and the regulator of architecture (but how long can this last?).’ And in a short review, published in 1987 in *AMC*, of the Netherlands Dance Theatre by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in The Hague, and unfortunately not included in this anthology, Damisch went so far as to compare Koolhaas (for more than a decade a paper architect) with Prouvé, explaining: ‘édifier un théâtre, c’est mettre en place une machine qui prêtera à son tour à toutes les manières de construction’.

It comes therefore as no surprise that, in ‘Architecture is...’, Damisch warns, not without moralistic undertones: ‘The fact that architecture has come to the point of even repudiating the idea of a foundation is something that we should not accept without consequence, especially in what passes for “architectural culture”. An architecture that will leave no trace of

itself, not even ruins, spells a utopia that risks announcing itself to be as disastrous as its totalitarian antithesis.’ In this remark, and in the reference to totalitarianism, the echo of Pierre Francastel, one of Damisch’ mentors at the Sorbonne in Paris, becomes clearly visible. In 1956, Francastel published *Art et technique aux XIXe et XXe siècles* – in many ways a statement of principles for a generation of post-war French (and European) intellectuals dealing with art and architecture. After World War II, the disastrous dangers of science and technology were paradoxically averted by developing a new kind of humanism in which the individual creative imagination – in art and architecture – played a major positive role. This was of course not automatically the case: Francastel famously accused Le Corbusier of trying to make people happy by means of the ‘concentration camps’ that he developed as his urban projects. But if it was possible to avoid another holocaust, the acts of artists and architects were crucial. ‘La société n’utilise pas des principes, mais des solutions pratiques,’ Francastel wrote. ‘La mise en relation de la société et de la science, implique l’existence d’intermédiaires qui sont les techniciens.’ In a similar vein, for Damisch architects specifically remain these *techniciens*: human beings who by means of creative interventions can turn scientific, technological and possibly inhuman developments into small but positive, meaningful and – in both senses – constructive contributions to society. This can only be done on the scale of the building, and so it is very consistent that in Damisch’ writings on architecture considerations on the city are completely absent.

The last and most recent text in *Noah’s Ark* – originally a lecture at the Canadian Centre for Architecture in 2003 – is devoted to the *Blur Building* by Diller + Scofidio, the exposition pavilion at the Swiss Expo in 2002, consisting of a large metal structure producing an enormous cloud of water vapour. In his introduction to this book, Anthony Vidler calls it ‘Viollet-le-Duc welded to Turner’ and (in the eyes of Damisch) ‘an architecture that, finally, will speak of its own internal contradictions.’ In refusing to consider the cloud or the ‘blur’ as ‘a superfluous detail, a bit of decor or ornament’, and instead by describing it as ‘an integral part of the structure’, Damisch indeed brings his own particular and all-embracing kind of structuralism to an extreme. At the same time, he also continues to hope against hope that architecture is not only an innocent activity, but also somewhat of a redeeming one, offering, at least for some, a small but important and real place of refuge, just like Noah’s Ark.